

Mauna Loa - Observatory Trail

April 21 & 22, 2004

by David Hoover

Since mid-January, I've been wanting to get up to the Mauna Loa Cabin. I thought it'd be a great place to celebrate my 50th birthday; to reflect on my first half century(!) and, with luck, the next 50, but the weather report was always unfavorable or I had something else going on that prevented me from being there.

Then in mid April I had an opportunity to take the trip during the middle of the week, I checked the weather forecast (looked good) and being self-employed, the boss seemed ok with me taking off, so I packed a bag on a Tuesday evening and headed out the next morning.

I left Kailua-Kona at 8:30, Wednesday morning and arrived at the Mauna Loa Weather Observatory, 11,000 feet on the east side of the mountain at 10:30, after a long 75 mile trip.

After changing out of my tropical outfit to the high altitude one and doing some last minute packing, which is a chore when the brain is not working well in the thin air, I headed out along the trail at 11:00.

A half mile or so of following the jeep road, the trail leaves it and heads up over a mostly pahoehoe trail base. About an hour into the hike I came to a shelter cave with two large ahu's marking it. This was a great place to take a break and enjoy the views of Mauna Kea and Haleakala on Maui.



*Mauna Loa shelter cave
photo by David Hoover April, 2004*

Then up, up, up over more pahoehoe till the trail hits the jeep road and follows it to a locked gate, where I took another break about an hour after leaving the shelter cave.

From there the trail gets better as it follows along a rift where the footing is cinder and although still steep you don't have to rock hop, just drag your feet. This is my favorite part of the trail; easier walking, the trail seems less steep, you're starting to get that "on top of the world" feeling as you come up to the last crossing of the jeep road and soon after, arrive at the edge of the North Pit.

I call this area the "crossroads", one trail leads southeast towards Red Hill Cabin, one trail leads northwest to the Mauna Loa summit and the trail I'm following leads south towards the Mauna Loa Cabin. I usually take a nice long break here and enjoy the solitude, but that day the clouds were rolling in and the temperature was dropping so I hightailed it the last two miles to the cabin.

The next half mile of the trail, across North Pit, is the best walking of the entire route. With almost level slabs of pahoehoe, the hike feels like strolling across a sidewalk. But the next half mile, after skirting the edge of a large pit crater (Lua Poholo), the trail climbs two hundred feet and I was feeling the elevation by then.

I was also feeling the wind and drizzle and cold as the weather was getting worse. I put on my rain gear and covered the pack the best I could with a big black garbage sack I had then stumbled my way through the fog and loose rocks that last, longest mile to the cabin.

In the evening, the storm passed, the stars came out with just a sliver of moon showing over the crater. I sat near the edge sipping red wine, listening to music ("Up!", by Shania Twain and "Room at the Top", by Tom Petty, among others) and tried to blow bubbles out over the crater, though they don't seem to float well at 13,250.

The next day I packed up and left the cabin around 8:00 am and hiked to the summit under blue, sunny skies where I enjoyed the view and rested from the hard hike to get there. Afterwards, I dropped down to the jeep road near a geologist recording station and followed it, through some large snow drifts, till it intersected the trail that leads back to the weather station. From there it was an easy jaunt down to the trailhead, where I savored the adventure I had while driving back to Kailua Kona.



*Dave
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